

Philosophy

Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson pushed his daughter to succeed, while Abigail Adams cautioned her son against failure.

Which is the better incentive?

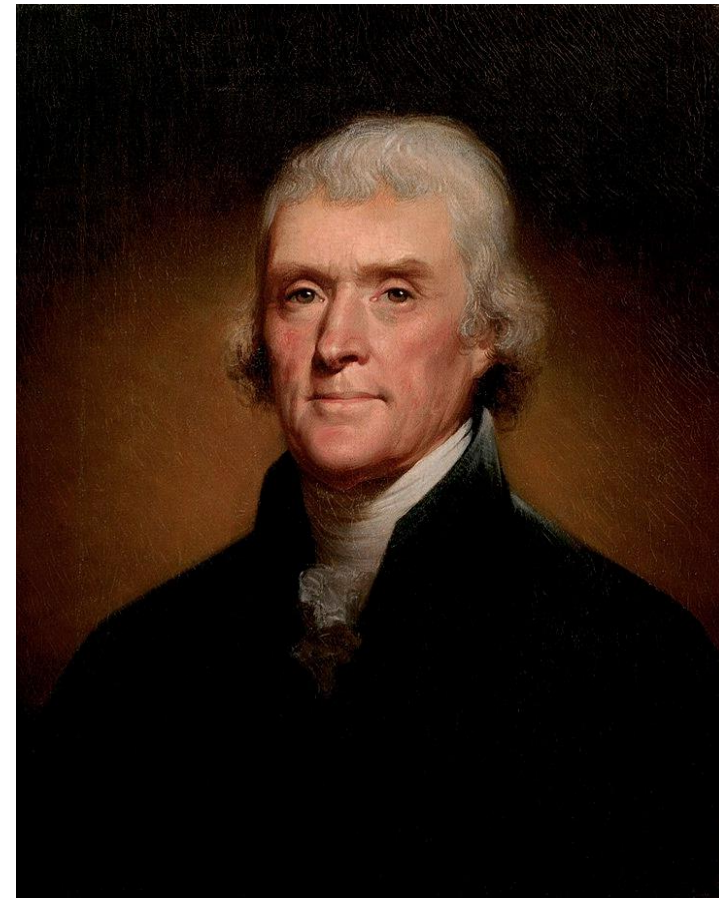
In 1783, Thomas Jefferson was in Maryland, serving as a Virginia delegate to the Continental Congress.

At the time, he was still grieving the death of his wife Martha, who had died soon after giving birth to their sixth child a year before. When duty called, Jefferson reluctantly left Monticello and his three living children – Martha (whom he called Patsy), Mary, and Lucy – in the care of a family friend. Forced to perform his fatherly duties from a distance, he wrote frequently to Patsy, who at the time of the following letter was 11 years old:

My Dear Patsy,

After four days' journey, I arrived here without any accident, and in as good health as when I left Philadelphia. The conviction that you would be more improved in the situation I have placed you than if still with me, has solaced me on my parting with you, which my love for you had rendered a difficult thing. The acquirements which I hope you will make under the tutors I have provided for you will render you more worthy of my love; and if they cannot increase it, they will prevent its diminution....

I have placed my happiness on seeing you good and accomplished, and no distress which this world can now bring on me could equal that of your disappointing my hopes. If you love me then, strive to be good under every situation and to all living creatures, and to acquire those accomplishments which I have put in your power, and which will go far towards ensuring you the warmest love of your affectionate father.



A few years earlier, in the midst of the colonies' struggle for independence, 11-year-old John Quincy Adams had accompanied his father on a mission to Paris to convince France to join in the war against Britain.

His mother, Abigail, was said to have missed her eldest son dearly, and wrote to him frequently. When she wrote the following letter in 1778, he had just completed the arduous Atlantic crossing:



Portrayal by Laura Linney

My Dear Son,

Tis almost four months since you left your native land and embarked upon the mighty waters in quest of a foreign country. Although I have not particularly wrote to you since yet you may be assured you have constantly been upon my heart and mind.

... remember that you are accountable to your maker for all your words and actions. Let me injoin [sic] it upon you to attend constantly and steadfastly to the precepts and instructions of your father as you value the happiness of your mother and your own welfare. ..., for dear as you are to me, I had much rather you should have found your grave in the ocean you have crossed, or any untimely death crop you in your infant years, rather than see you an immoral profligate or a graceless child.

Yet you must keep a strict guard upon yourself, or the odious monster [i.e., vice] will soon lose its terror, by becoming familiar to you.

